



**Roskilde
University**

Visuals

Competencies in Expression

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Bjørn Laursen:

Visuals - competencies of expression.

STATIC pictures.

***Comparing writing and drawing.**

As an opening remark it is relevant to point out that the static picture plays a fundamental role for all other typologies of pictures. That is why it is relevant to pay deep attention to it.

If you write something on a piece of paper or if you draw something on a piece of paper (which both are relatively familiar situations in our culture (the first one more common than the latter)) the two situations apparently look very much like each other.

When you write you produce a lot of figures (the letters) on a ground (the paper). When you draw you produce some figures or elements (an elephant, a man, a dog, a balloon, a white horse or what do I know) on a ground (the paper). In both cases the paper keeps its physical form unless you destroy it, which hopefully is an exception.

That means apparently, that the edge of the paper is also the edge of the written page and of the drawing.

However, you seldom find letters close to all four edges of the paper, because you make margins when you write. This sounds simple to adults, but is it that simple, try to remember the way drawings fill out a piece of paper?

You often find drawings that "use all of the paper", which means that the drawing covers the entire area of the paper, so here you can meet an elephant close to the edge of the paper. That is one of the differences when you compare the two "media" writing and drawing. The elephant may seem to be walking on the white paper, but often it will walk on some kind of ground like grass, drawn grass that is, made by the person who made the picture. But the letters, words, sentences, paragraphs people write will always appear on the white background.

***Figure/ground-relationship**

Why do we see these differences and what is the background for them?

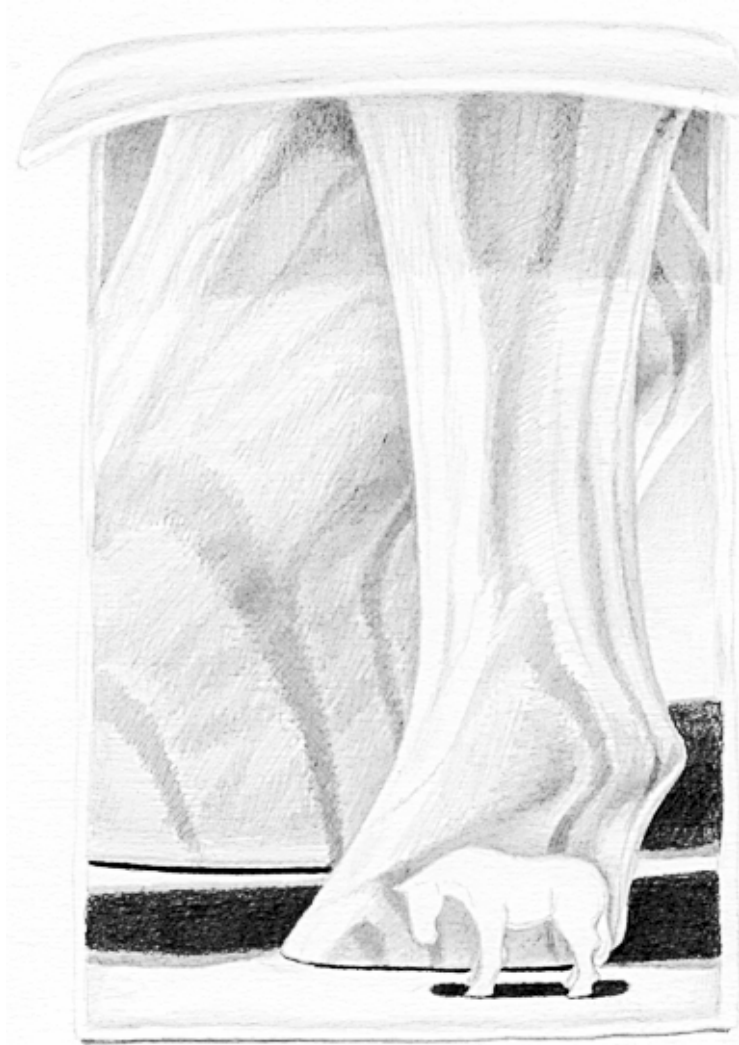
In writing we almost want an absolutely clear figure/ground relationship. We can easily separate the figure from the ground then. To make that even easier we produce margins so that the boarder of the sheet will be distinguished from any surrounding that piece of paper might be in. So we create a document using some practical rules where we have a border around the text. That means we have two formats: the shape of the paper (often one rectangle where the edge of the paper configure the shape) and an other rectangle filled with letters that form words etc. We create a clear formal distinction between figure and ground when we write. You could also say that we create a new format on the paper by creating the margins.

This seems to be a quite elaborated form which is absolutely a common knowledge in the non illiterate part of our culture.

The fact that we do not create a separate format when we draw, might indicate that the aspect of "illiteracy" is more widespread when we consider the discipline of visualisation. When you want to draw something it might be a good idea as a point of departure to reflect on what format might be the most relevant to choose for your visualisation. And you have to aware of the phenomenon (in great contrast to writing where the figure/ground relationship is nearly always absolutely stable) that as well figure and ground will play often highly different and complex roles.

***A complex figure/ground-example:**

In the following pencil drawing you would not have been able to see the little white horse if the ground had been white! But is the ground the ground?



A picture can be a complex canvas

We have developed some bad habits in the educational system concerning the fundamental question about how meaning is built. A child is able to move around and see the surrounding world and build meaning before it learns to talk. But we live in a culture that up till the appearance of the computer primarily gave priority to spoken or written language and avoided the fact that perception of the world with our sensory capacities is absolutely basic for building meaning, so just some of the relevant tools were developed, leaving out the competence of visualisation. But things are changing, the computer culture develops other demands.

***Consciousness**

Elliot W. Eisner (Eisner 1991) quotes Polanyi (1967) who said: "We not only know more than we can tell, we tell far less than we know". This is an important challenge regarding a computer screens capacity to show complex visualisations. It does not "solve the problem" (luckily our brains are too complex) but it gives new potentials to challenge the question of what consciousness is built of!

Eisner has a lot of distinct analytical remarks in his book "The Enlightened Eye": "We need not make a statement or claim to know what is before us. And during the course of most of our lives we do not." (Eisner 1991). But when we create a multimedia system we make a universe which means the creation of some kind of a world before us, and then we have to show a lot more than we can tell.

That means that if we want to use the potentials of a media like that, one of the rhetorical demands we face is the competence to visualise in such a way that other people that meet this world will be fascinated and try to travel deeper into it.

***Focus**

We have the visual capacity to focus. That is one aspect of the complex phenomena Eisner (indirectly) is mentioning. We can just focus on a smaller area. But luckily we can turn our head and move our body. That means that in general we can focus on what we find interesting in our surroundings. In light we focus or have a "sharp" visual perception of our surroundings if we are not handicapped.

In the following I describe visually just a tiny part of "what is before me" to examine carefully an interesting figure on a ground.

***A corner of the world**

I have chosen to deal with one tangible minor aspect of the world around: the object is a small hand-carved wooden horse, recently purchased at a market.



A tired horse is arriving on the canvas.

Why this particular object? There are many possible explanations.

Perhaps because it evokes childhood. Maybe because its form and mode of expression extend into the adult world -for it is not merely a piece of Swedish folk carving but rather a concise and pure expression of woodcarving skills in the form of a tired work horse.

Yet precisely as a result of developments in post-war and post-modern society, hard physical labour -like the work horse- fortunately no longer exists. This tiny wooden figure thus becomes a monument to a form of labour which is no longer desirable in its present form: nowadays society is more in need of creative horsepower!

***Form**

Let us then go on to regard the drawing of this horse as an expression of creativity. This again

leads us back to the miniature horse's unerring accuracy of form, for what is it trying to convey to us?

How can we define it, apart from the obvious fact that it seems to look like a horse?

If we observe the figure in the picture from a formalistic point of view it becomes apparent that the position of its legs is predominantly vertical, giving it an immobile appearance which is emphasised by the bowed neck curve of the head. All in all, the impression of a self-sufficient form, inwardly reflective in mode.

It is reminiscent of the horses in the rain in Danish Theodor Philipsen's paintings* . But why this particular form of expression?

***Codes**

Its expression is encoded: the key lying partly in the way we interpret body language and cultural influences.

For these reasons the figure's mode of expression is highly accurate. We are in this case not merely observing the world around us, but the world filtered through embedded codes of which we may be more or less aware.

Drawing processes -with observation and perception as their point of departure- represent a means of examining and exploring simple things from the world around us which may, on further examination, prove to be less simple than first assumed.

If we proceed to examine the drawing in more detail, we will clearly observe a relationship between the figure and its background: a wooden horse against a background encompassing the whole format of the drawing and including a shadow of the figure itself. This latter factor conveys an impression of depth in the drawing as a whole. Moreover, the drawing has a spatial dimension as it also creates an illusion of the creative process itself. But if you focus on the drawing pencil you cannot see the horse sharply anymore!

***Style**

In fact, the drawing has strongly evocative powers. This is further emphasised by an attempt to reproduce the texture of wooden material. The visual medium is naturalistic in mode, to such an extent that one might even describe it as neo-realist.

Yet the precisely rendered shadow suggests a level of abstraction: if it is examined in its own right it does not merely complement the figure of the horse. By changing the visual angle and height the same motif can be altered considerably. For example, the shadow can easily be given a non-figurative appearance. Work on figurative drawings can thus provide inroads to many other visual and artistic modes.

If we then attempt to sum up our perceptual observations and cognitive awareness of this small drawing it becomes apparent that it activates visual and language codes. This small sample of the outside world becomes complex when it is related to the development of awareness and the task of separating the intertwined elements of visual and language codes is no longer a simple one.

***Curricula**

Yet our educational system and our upbringing clearly distinguish between language and visual skills and disproportionately allocate resources, time and effort to the two disciplines. There is however in future curricula just one discipline: *Consciousness*, covering two major subjects:

* Theodor Philipsen, Danish impressionist painter 1840-1920.

-how do we build meaning

-how do we communicate meaning

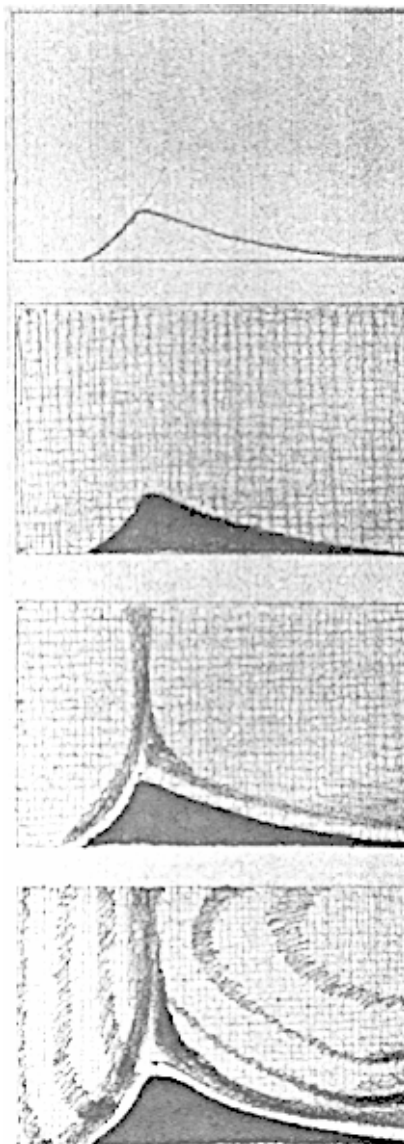
Is it at all possible to open access to making visualisations that can communicate complex knowledge?

The answer is definitely affirmative, yet it requires a considerable investment of resources to give the experiment the necessary substantial backing. People who believe they are incapable of drawing in most cases do not lack ability and talent, but knowledge, practice and pedagogical guidance.

***Depicting texture.**

Let's take an example. Is it at all possible to reproduce the wooden figure on paper so that it appears to be made of wood? (Laursen 1988/89/90)

In practice yes, but only when you are familiar with the following simple principles:



a: Work with a limited format (e.g. 3 x 5 cm.) and concentrate on one particular area, a limited part of the motif.

This presents no great problem as far as drawing skills are concerned, since the task has been simplified so that it no longer requires taking the complexity of the whole figure into consideration, but instead allows you to turn your attention to the scrutiny and reproduction of the physical texture of the object.

Make a careful outline of the contour. You may be confused by the relationship between the figure and its background. (fig. a).

b: This problem is quickly solved by regarding the limited area as a flat surface and examining the grey tones.

If you hold a small scrap of white paper up against the wooden figure you will quickly see that none of the areas are completely white, so it will be necessary to shade them.

But then it still doesn't look like wood and the shape is completely flat!

This problem can also be solved quite simply.

c: Examine the relationship between light and shadow within the small area you are drawing and reproduce it, after which the form will emerge.

But the surface texture is still not evident.

d: The surface texture is added at the final stage, and the total structure of the depicted part of the object emerges on paper without having presented insurmountable problems at any stage of the process.

***Pedagogical strategy**

The explanation is that it is important to learn how to draw in stages which provide an approach to the motif, a process based not so much on achieving an immediately recognisable object, but rather directed towards the various stages in the drawing process which finally make up the desired end product.

Not many people would tackle the process in this way if they had not learnt these techniques through instruction. An appreciation of the importance of heightened visual powers can also be acquired in the process.

Much can be achieved if one accepts that it is a lengthy and complicated learning process involving many different exercises. Drawing requires training in the same way as speech and writing does.

All in all the whole field of visual and language skills is enriched by a more enquiring approach and a greater degree of integration between the two skills.

The exercise, also proves that it can be useful to determine the limits of the format before embarking on the drawing process, a factor few people take into consideration, letting the whole sheet of paper automatically determine the limits of the picture.

However the format is an important factor in determining the outcome of the final picture. So it is also important to learn how to experiment in setting limits and reducing the format.

***Different interpretations**

In the drawing with the small white horse (the first horse illustration) the size is relatively accentuated and the complex nature of the illustration cannot be interpreted unambiguously from a communicative point of view. Yet the picture might convey a type of experience similar to one most of us have had in relation to objects or rooms in our childhood which seem in retrospect to have become smaller.

The picture might also be a study in texture or -a third possibility- a comment on the power factor: for one horsepower does not have the same value in the picture as a whole. A fourth

interpretation could be that the picture deals with what lies beyond its physical limits, (the top edge of the picture is curved) what does the world beyond really look like?

***Awareness**

The illustration poses many questions and activates the observer's awareness of certain sets of problems which need ordering -for the picture itself doesn't provide any direct answers. It remains in a state of communicative suspension which is complex and ambiguous. As is some times the case with the world around us.

In a similar way many effects can be achieved by focusing the eye closely on the object.

Perhaps this gives you an idea of the explorative nature of figurative drawing and the contribution this represents as on of the tools for our ability to examine the fluctuating world around us. We are ourselves multisensorical multimedia.

***A mirror**

When this increasingly familiar wooden figure is placed upon a mirror, all previous assumptions about it collapse. From the impression of a tired work horse it now appears to be a horse absorbed in its own reflection in the mirror:



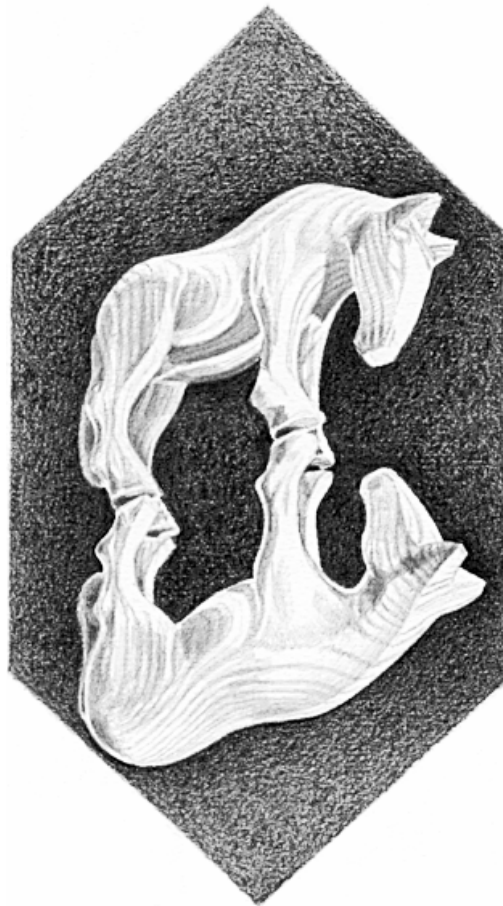
Perhaps this gives us cause for speculation. Hasn't this figure, with which we have become reasonably well acquainted, been exhausted of visual surprises by now.

Apparently not! The world is fantastic. But that doesn't necessarily mean we are always aware of this.

Perhaps some people are startled by the enigmatic nature of this realisation. For the ability to reflect or to become deeply fascinated requires time, something rarely granted us in the hectic whirl of sensory impressions to which we are subjected.

***Upside-down**

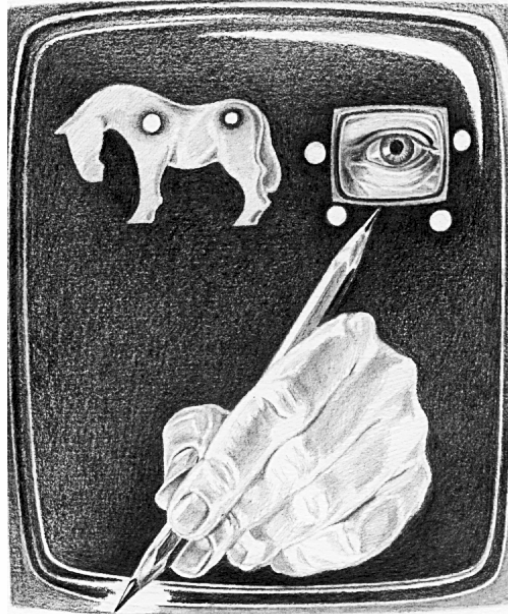
If we turn the mirror reflection upside-down the information that the drawing is communication is once again transformed:



The various directions or angles at which the object can be observed transform the impression of a self-reflective figure to a visual assertion of dominance.

***Forces and form**

These illustrations might well be about dominance or being dominated by certain forces or developments. Or perhaps they might be seen as illustrations of fields or tension in which subject/object relations appear irreconcilable, e. g. the entire media boom, where today we stand on the threshold of a far more rapid expansion.



The photographic and video media do provide many opportunities and should therefore be used to a great extent often in combination with other visual languages.

***Germinate phases**

They do not offer, to the same extent as sketching, similar insights into the germinate phases in the emerge of a picture, i e. the processes preceding the final product such as:

- the visual and cognitive basis for planning a picture
- the actual planning of the picture
- the rough draft
- alterations and
- radical reinterpretations of the structure of the picture, e. g. in relation to the format.

But computers and photographic media will fruitfully be integrated as a help in these perspectives because you can save a digital picture at any time and therefore dare to experiment absolutely freely.

***Skills**

It is in this particular germinate area that the greatest advantages and opportunities lie. When you have acquired these basic skills and insights the camera and the computer can be used to far greater visual advantage.

Increased interest in and attention to the emergence of the picture will constantly enrich visual interpretation skills. These are at the moment primarily dominated by comparative descriptions of completed pictures, and descriptions covering the process from sketch to final end-product exist only to a limited extent.

Naturally the overall aim must be the broadest, most kaleidoscopic perceptual variety possible, as seen through the eyes of ordinary people in their everyday lives.

***Complexities**

"Our knowing does not depend upon our telling." Eisner(2) points out, and continues: "Our telling is a way of making public what we have come to know. Connoisseurship is the means

through which we come to know complexities, nuances, and subtleties of aspects of the world in which we have a special interest." (1992).

***Connoisseurship**

In multimedia productions you can and should deal with this core question of connoisseurship. We are ourselves extremely complex interactive multimedia that do have special interests. We cannot tell all relevant aspects we know of an interesting subject, and we cannot visualise all our conclusions about it. But we can communicate on a highly qualified level when we learn to use and develop interactive multimedia to such standards that it can communicate deep parts of what is in -or can be brought out of- our consciousness concerning relevant aspects of the world. Different perspectives and different rhetorically relevant compositions are important aspects supporting these intentions.



***Plurality**

Plurality of visual languages is an other communicative core discussing rhetoric of the computer screen in a multimedia production. You should be able to communicate using several visual languages simultaneously in that montage medium a multimedia seems to be.

***Limits of a genre**

Knowledge of genre -and here especially the aesthetic and communicative limits of a given genre- is the qualified basis for choosing and selecting variants of style and use them in expressive combinations. So you should two questions:

1)what can this genre communicate?

and

2)what is it, that this genre cannot communicate?

The "chestnut-leave" illustration above show some examples of how different meanings the term visual language covers, showing a mimetic leave, a modernistic "Cobra" leave, a computer-style leave, and three other formal possibilities, all representing different connotations.

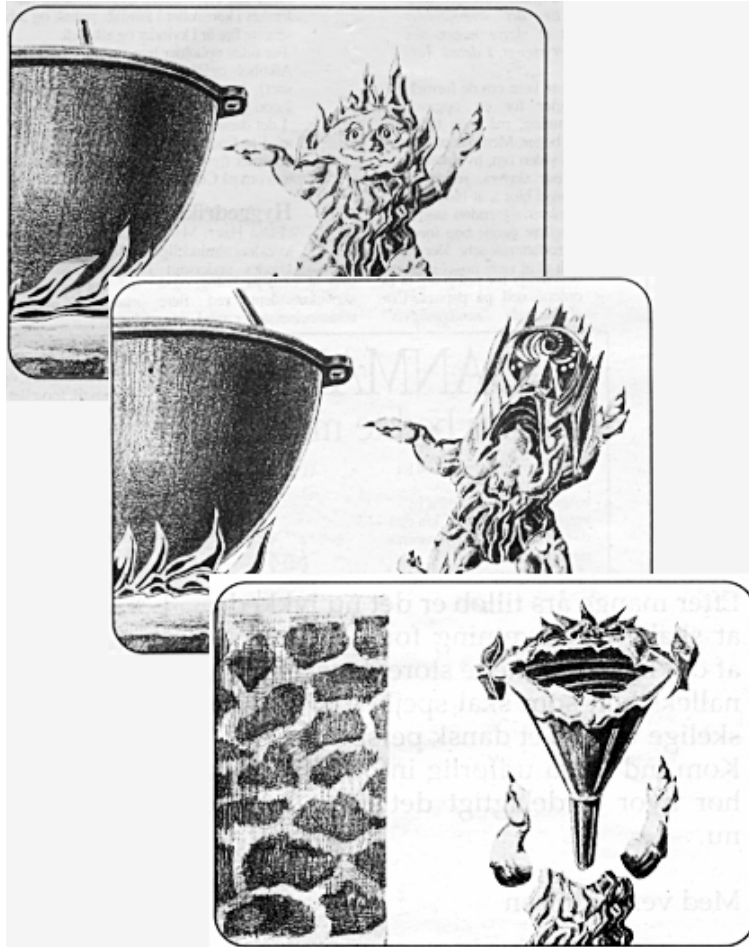
SEQUENCE

*Visual narration in different stiles

The dwarf in the strip travels his way through a sort of:

- 1)fantastic *naturalism* to
- 2)*expressionism* and
- 3)*surrealism*

in his various metamorphosis(Laursen 1991a):



The style can change from frame to frame.

*Three stories visually told simultaneously

From a dramatic and narrative point of view it is at the same time important to notice that you tell three stories simultaneously:

- 1)the spoken words from the dwarf who always wants more food
- 2)the dwarf's body language that shows that he is (or believes to be) the most powerful agent in the scene
- 3)the metamorphosis of the dwarf's face

*Organic appearance

All these different parameters have to cooperate in an *organic* way. *Timing* for these changes become a core structure for that reason. If the timing is not organic it will disturb the total rhetoric effect of all the interacting parameters, mentioned earlier.

***Visualisation as an epistemic sequence**

A few years ago in Sweden I was watching some famous engravings from the Bronze Ages in a cliff. Suddenly twenty-five people from Japan turned up with a guide who told about the visualisations I no longer had undisturbed access to analyse (Laursen 1991b).

***The scenario**

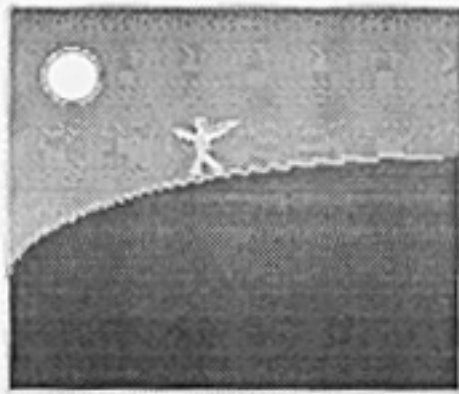
In stead I stepped backwards watching the whole scenario in a distance.

The weather was sunny which is a relevant factor to accompany the Bronze Age time, because it looks as if these people thousands of years ago paid a special interest to the sun. It was probably regarded as the major god or the universe.

Now the guide told her audience a lot about these visualisations in the cliff. Her little lecture had a relatively high standard.

***The sun**

But something was missing.



If you live in a culture that is deeply interested in the sun as the basis for life's existence it is a natural and logical theory to expect these people to also pay a considerable attention to their cast shadows. Why precisely? Because your body from a spatial point of view is situated between the sun and the ground.

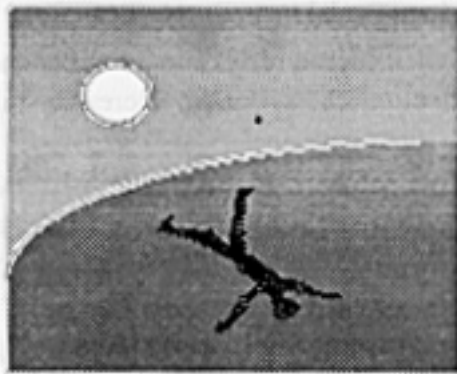
***Cast shadows**

Your body will "cast a shadow" when the sun shines because the sunbeams are not able to pass your body. In our culture people do not pay special conscious attention to the phenomenon of cast shadows, but in the following illustration they will, if they have seen the former, because the shadow is the only new element in the picture.



If we follow the sequence as a sequence we will observe as the most dominant quality of the third illustration, that the person acting in the two former frames has disappeared, but the cast shadow is left.

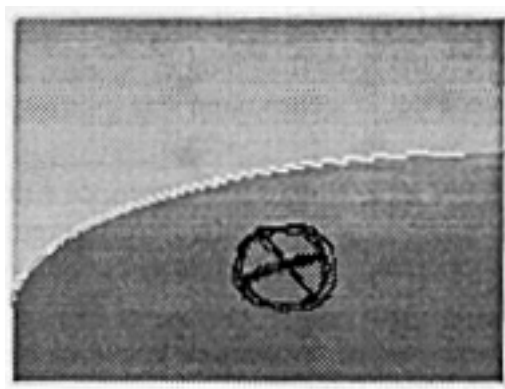
***Attention and absence**



As an cognitively interesting phenomenon we see quite clearly what is absent! And if we cast a glance on the last illustration we have no difficulty interpreting that the shadow of the figure is transformed into something else.

***Transformation**

In other words we have got a visual interpretation of what epistemologically is the basis for the appearance of these famous engravings: they are cognitively rooted in the phenomenon of shadows. A child can understand that by looking for a short while on these illustrations.



That was not the result or interpretation however with these twenty-six tourist people. They swallowed the traditional art explanation that do not mention the core aspect of the shadow at all.

***Missing a core aspect**

And they did not see that they themselves cast shadows or that the same phenomenon characterised the guide. She did not get to this elementary and obvious point either.

We may have learned to learn what tradition tells us is correct to such an extent that in some examples like the one given it can totally hide obvious explanations that can easily be interpreted from looking at our adjacent surroundings. Here is an example where the interpretation tradition has made a relatively short story longer and more complex than it is.

***Hypothesis**

Why are the engravings so irregular? A good answer is that they are irregular because of the relation to the shadow phenomenon and that shadows in nature always fall on irregular surfaces.

Is the given interpretation the correct one? Nobody knows and will ever know! But it is a qualified hypothesis that should be considered seriously.

***Space**

And the example shows how little attention we sometimes pay to concrete perception, even when it is sort of part of the spatial phenomena that should be analysed!

Compare at last the story I told about my experience in Sweden, which is a true experience. Or even better, tell it to some other people who have not seen the sequence of the four pictures, and see if they understand the problematic. Try then to show the pictures to some who have not been told the story, and see how they interpret the sequence.

The final question would be then: How would you rhetorically deal with this problematic in a multimedia?

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***Illustrations:**

All illustrations by Bjørn Laursen